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ON THE DOCTRINE OF  
PERSONAL IDENTITY

C. COMYNS TUCKER

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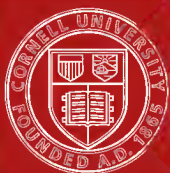
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# ON THE DOCTRINE OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

CONSIDERED WITH REFERENCE  
TO A FUTURE LIFE

BY

C. COMYNS TUCKER

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## PREFACE

I DO not suppose that anything in this little dissertation which may be possessed of value has not been said before and said better by others. The object of these reflections, put together originally as a relief from a great sorrow, has, in the main, been to find some foundation for a belief in continued conscious existence after death—not in Christian Revelation, which may have been rejected, not in a Spiritualism the evidence in support of which is always defective and often paltry, not in the mathematician's dream of a world where space should be of four dimensions and which consequently, though it may be close beside us, remains invisible to us—but in a purely metaphysical

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conception, viz., that of a conscious and inalienable personal identity.

Such speculations can at least do no harm, and if they fail themselves to satisfy, may yet be of service in leading the mind of the inquirer to some train of thought or reasoning of his own on which he may rest more securely than upon anything here offered for his consideration.

C. C. T.



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“Strange difficulties have been raised by some concerning personal identity, or the sameness of living agents implied in the notion of our existing now and hereafter or in any two successive moments.”      BISHOP BUTLER.

It is probable that every rational being, so long as he lives and is conscious, is aware of a thread of unchangeableness running through his existence. The Greek said : “ Every one seeks for happiness for himself, *remaining himself*.” A man does not wish to *be* another, but to *remain himself*, while having the circumstances, the advantages, the position, the character or the virtues of that other. And this note of unchangeableness is not affected at all by the fact that

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every material atom of our frames is in the course of nature changed or consumed and replaced within the revolution of a definite number of years, so that it is difficult from the point of view of mere matter to say of the man who existed seven or ten years ago that he has disappeared or is here.

Nor is this element of permanency in change moral or intellectual any more than it is material. It is not permanency of character, nor depends on it. The whole moral fibre of the man may, through circumstances, by influence of others, it may be by Divine interposition, be transformed and replaced by a better or different production; until the language of the New Testament as to regeneration, a new creature, a second birth, seems not to be beyond the mark. But the continuity of Being regarded by itself has no moral complexion. It is neither good nor bad. It does not remain because of moral improvement or deterioration, but in spite of it. Some indeed of

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the most awful passages in human experience, as in human literature, turn upon the sudden revelation to the consciousness of deteriorated moral character co-existent with continued sameness of Being. The momentary recognition of self, but of a hopelessly or inevitably degraded self, furnishes subject for the tremendous portraiture of Dante and Milton, as it supplies the writer of "Elle et Lui" with the horror of the vision in the Forest of Fontainebleau. Where the process has been one of "regeneration," *i.e.*, of improvement instead of deterioration, the recognition of essential sameness in the man at two different epochs is hardly less striking, though usually in such case giving rise not to feelings of exultation but to such humble utterances as that of the Marian martyr on seeing a malefactor drawn to Tyburn, "There but for the grace of God goes John Bradford."

Nor is this permanency an intellectual quality. It may and does exist in greater

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force and distinctness where consciousness is strong, clear and active, but the mere development of intellectual powers or their decay does not touch it. Those powers may be developed in regular order, with fuller or lesser success, with increased or diminished intensity, and wither again, without affecting this spinal cord of our existence. Intellectual faculties, notably reflection and memory, imagination perhaps above all, may be called on in aid; but the feeling of, and belief in, the substantial sameness of our being is not convertible with any of them. It is this central core of our nature which seems more than any other attribute to constitute the true self or "ego," and the knowledge of it is what we commonly call the sense of personal identity.\* Its existence may not be susceptible of proof, but it is a universal fact of consciousness, and nothing that does

\* Cf. Locke: "Essay," vol. i. p. 146, "The sameness of a rational being."

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not destroy consciousness can divest a rational being of it.

Nor is this essential unity, subsisting in us from the cradle to the grave, affected by the fact that it is not in truth continuous, but is rather to be regarded as the sum of an infinite series of successive states. The ray of light is not less a ray of light because in reality composed of a succession of emissions or undulations whose only connection consists in the velocity of their progress. The graceful action of a Greek athlete, or the elastic movement of a horse in the act of leaping or in full gallop, are shown by the instantaneous photograph to be the product of a series of motions following each other with extreme rapidity, and each, it may be, when considered separately, ungainly. Such a scrutiny conceals from us instead of revealing the real character of what is before our eyes. It is only by summing the series and regarding the separate phases together that the

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essential nature of the phenomenon can be grasped.

Something analogous to the process described takes place in the historical judgments passed upon men after their death. The lesser facts of their lives, their secondary as opposed to their ruling motives, are passed over, or reduced to their true proportions, with the object of gaining a more general and therefore simpler estimate of their work and character ; but such conception is not (or should not be) other than the summing up of the details, or at least, if the judgment is to be true, strictly founded upon them.

Having thus far analysed, or, more strictly speaking, described the sense of personal identity, what it is, and how manifested, we have next to consider what, if any, bearing it has on the doctrine of a future life, its probability and character.

And first we note that to read the doctrine of personal identity into the

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doctrine of a future existence enormously enhances the value of the latter, increases the attractiveness of the belief, and creates the predisposition to accept it.

That the doctrine of a future life *can* be held and strongly held without the aid of a belief in the continuance of a separate individuality in that life, is shown by more than one Oriental creed. Brahminism and Buddhism alike contemplate a future existence, not by the survival of the individual spirit, but by its absorption into the universal or world soul. Yet even here there are traces of a desire that the character, the qualities, even the outward environment of the individual, should not perish but be preserved, even if modified in form. Thus the widespread belief in the transmigration of souls, where it is not disciplinary, involves, or is commonly associated with, the production in a new form of qualities possessed in an earlier existence. The prowess of the conqueror or

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of the athlete is reproduced in the brute courage and strength of the lion or the elephant; the cunning of Thersites reappears in the ape or the fox. Even where the new life is, as in some forms of the belief it appears, one not of similarity but of contrast, as where for example the change is from the life of the monarch to that of the peasant, from the cruel persecutor to the hunted mouse, the personal identity is still implied, and the changed conditions merely shadow the remorse or the discipline of the same still existent individual. But in the system of thought as developed in Europe, the belief in the continued personality of the dead is not an accretion to, but of the very essence of, the belief in a future life. It is hardly too much to say that for Western minds at least a doctrine of the immortality of the soul which does not carry with it the power, or at least the possibility, of mutual recognition of individuals in that future



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existence, in other words without the feature of a conscious personal identity continuing after death, is not worth having; and the alternative with those minds is not a belief in the future existence of spirit in an impersonal form, but a denial of its continued existence in *any* form.

But it will be said : “ Granted that the prospect of the continued existence of a separate self would tend to make the doctrine of a future life more attractive, yet that fact goes no way to strengthen the doctrine itself ; it is a mere case of the wish being father to the thought.” And it may be conceded that unless under a theory of final causes which might support an argument that an instinct or yearning would not be implanted so generally in the human heart only to disappoint and mislead, the desire, however widely felt, to entertain a belief in no way dispenses with the necessity of independent proof of its truth.

It may be further admitted that Bishop

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Butler, in the passage that stands at the head of this dissertation, does not treat the sense of personal identity as a *fact of consciousness* leading to the presumption of continued existence now and hereafter, but as itself an inference arising from the observed continued existence of a rational being during two or more successive moments, and it is of course not legitimate reasoning first to infer personal identity from the observed continuity of existence, and then to deduce a theory of continued existence from the conclusion of sameness so arrived at. If, however, we treat, as the argument up to this point entitles us to treat, the sense of an essential and continuous sameness of Being in ourselves as not an inference from observed facts, but as itself a fact of consciousness requiring no proof, and to be accepted axiomatically, it is not too much to say that the whole of Butler's argument for the existence after death of rational beings is applicable to that

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manifestation of life which we refer to as the sense of personal identity, and is even exhibited in its case in the strongest form of which the argument is capable. If the continued existence of certain physical, mental and moral attributes unimpaired, and in some cases showing increased power up to the very moment of dissolution, leads to the presumption that the shock of death does not really end them, what are we to say of that consciousness of separate individual existence which we have seen to be more abiding than any physical, intellectual or moral attributes and to be independent of them? The instinctive feeling that among all the millions of rational beings that inhabit this earth there is not, nor, if only for the reason that the environment would necessarily be different, ever has been one with the precise individuality which we possess, and the further conviction that that personality has endured with us through all the changes of our life,

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whether physical or spiritual, and in spite of them, may well give us, on the principles laid down by Butler himself, a confidence in the survival of our true selves stronger than any assurance resulting from the instances actually adduced by the author of the "Analogy."

Assuming, then, that the sense of personal identity raises a presumption, first, of a continued existence of ourselves after death, and, secondly, of an individual and separate existence as opposed to an absorption into universal or infinite spirit, we pass by natural sequence to the question of the *form* in which that individual existence, its powers and attributes, will be manifested. The problem is as old as Christianity, rather as old as human thought itself. On the answer to it depends the possibility of mutual recognition in a future state. Will the mother, spared to the natural term of human existence, meet the child taken from her in her

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early married life as the child she knew and loved, and in the form which she has ever since cherished, and to the latest moment of her conscious existence will cherish in her heart? Will the husband, dying in early manhood, meet the wife who is left to survive him in the form which the course of subsequent years has given to her, or in all the glory of her youthful beauty :

“Not as she is, but was when Life shone bright,  
Not as she is, but as she fills his dream.” \*

Such questions could be multiplied indefinitely, and cry for an answer.

Of this character was the question of the scoffing Sadducees : “ Whose wife shall she be of the seven ? ” and such the question of the idlers of Corinth : “ How are the dead raised, and with what body do they come ? ” If asked in seriousness, such questions seem fair as well as natural,

\* Christina Rossetti, “ In an Artist’s Studio.”

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yet the answer given to the first was in effect a refusal to satisfy curiosity, while the reply of the great Apostle to the second consisted but of a reproof and a metaphor. And yet in the highest and most spiritual utterances of Greek thought, as formulated by Plato in his development of the Eleatic Philosophy, there might have been found, it is conceived, a hint and even more than a hint at a solution. In the Platonic world of Being the things that strike the sense are not the real things, but appearances, copies only, or shadows of the real. The table, the bedstead, as we see them, with their variations of shape, ornamentation or colour, are but imperfect reproductions of a true Being or Form, the prototype of every table, every bedstead, with defects that have crept in or non-essential features that have been added, it may be from want of skill or faulty conception on the part of the workman, or through necessary limitation

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arising from the inferior material with and upon which he had to work. The earthly appearances stand to the real things or Forms in some such relation as that in which members of a class stand to their species, or they to their genera, and are inferior to them by just so much as is accidental, fleeting or wanting in permanency in the imitations. Thus Plato sought to evolve unity out of plurality.

But the theory, while striving to establish "notional unity as the element of permanence in the vicissitude of the phenomenal" is soon seen to reintroduce plurality by the multiplication of the Forms. If each earthly manifestation of human existence, for example, as we know it, childhood, boyhood, manhood, has its perfect original or archetype, we soon have to create as many Forms as there are stages in the history of a human life; the supposed unity disappears again in plurality, and no single impression of all

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the stages taken together is possible within the theory.\*

What is wanted for the production of a single and yet complete representation of an object or an existence made up of many diverse or successive manifestations, whether in place or time, is a principle of unity underlying and connecting together those manifestations, persisting through and in spite of them, and exhibiting them as accidental and fleeting in comparison with its own permanence. Such a principle, it is conceived, may be found in the case of human beings (with which we are alone concerned) in the sense of personal identity, the "sameness of a rational being," and in perhaps no other attribute of our nature.

\* The Aristotelian criticism. Schwegler's "History of Philosophy." Apologies are offered for this jejune statement of the doctrine of ideas as appearing in the "Republic" and the "Phædo." It will of course be apparent that the whole is used rather in the way of illustration than as a serious attempt to build on Plato's foundation.



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Whether the weakness of the Platonic theory noticed above might be removed or modified by the introduction of any such principle of unity as has been suggested, or not, the solution of the particular difficulty with which the present treatise deals must, it is conceived, be found, if found at all, in this direction. Some objections and doubts that may reasonably be entertained to the suggestion must now be dealt with.

An objection may not improbably be raised to the suggestion of a super-sensuous Form reproducing not merely one simple impression of a vanished life, but summing up and embodying all the successive stages of it, that such a Form, even if established, would be of little value, and certainly would not satisfy the craving of human hearts to meet in a future existence the very person in the very shape that had been familiar in the life here. The objection is natural, but is one which does not bear examination. Let us consider for a moment

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what is necessary for the adequate understanding of a person's outward form by our bodily senses. No complete comprehension of a face or figure is ever perhaps obtained by a single or simple perception, certainly no such comprehension as would remain long in the memory or after a long period of separation would ensure recognition. The impression, if at all adequate to stand such a test, is almost certainly the result of a comparison and collation of several aspects of the phenomenon perceived, as, for example, of full face, profile, play of expression and the like, which are, moreover, seldom or never exhibited simultaneously, or perceived otherwise than in successive moments of time by the observer. For an impression of this kind, moreover, generalisation, reflection and consequently lapse of time, brief though in some cases it may be, are required, and that once admitted the objection is seen to rest on a false premise.

Nor can the objection, abandoned as to

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the formation of a single perception, be admitted because the process of generalisation and idealisation supposed by our theory is extended over long periods and is applied to the facts, the appearances, and the physical manifestations of an entire life, instead of to a perception the completion of which requires only the lapse of a few moments. The difference between the two cases is indeed one of degree only, and not one of kind. Considered with reference to eternity the life of every human being is but an instant, or point of time; and though capable, on being examined, as it were, with a magnifying glass, of being resolved into periods, phases, characteristics differing at different times, yet is not less capable of being grasped as a whole than is one particular portion of it. Nor are there required for such conception any powers differing in kind from, however much they may transcend in degree, those powers of generalisation

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and reflection which we now possess, and the exercise of which we have seen to be necessary for all but the simplest perceptions in the life here.

Something analogous to the process suggested takes place on the meeting after many years of separation of two old friends. The eye rests on a face and figure that are unfamiliar and strange ; there is no recognition : gradually other senses, such as hearing, and intellectual powers such as reflection and memory, come into play : after a while, a blending of the old image or simulacrum with the new impression takes place ; the friend is regained, but *with the correction required by circumstances*. Here by a process partly of sense, partly of reasoning, the alteration that has taken place is rejected (at any rate in so far as such alteration might be made an argument for considering the person actually seen to be a different person from the old friend) as accidental,

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and the essential sameness, the personal identity of the two, is accepted, not to be again questioned.

Here, the resulting image is the joint product of the original perception enshrined in the memory, and of the present appearance, brought together and blended by the exercise of various senses and faculties. The process when carried out in this life is not always an agreeable one. Something is lost, and lost with reluctance, but the identification is achieved all the same, and a succession of differing phases and stages of a life is ultimately focused in a single impression, of which it cannot be said that it is wholly old, or wholly new.

But it may be said : " By admitting the necessity of correcting the old by the new impression, you are giving up the whole case. It is clear on your own showing that the being we meet in that future life will *not* be the same but altered, it may be altered beyond recognition. At any rate

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all the consolation you offer is the mere hope that by an elaborate exercise of powers of generalisation and reflection we may regain a *part* of what was lost, and ultimately recognise in the new image a shadow of the face and form we knew and loved so well."

But this is to misconceive the argument. It is not contended that there is no alteration (it is obvious indeed that there *is* superficial change) ; what is contended is, that as well by the powers we are possessed of, or an easily supposable extension of them, as by our metaphysical equipment, we are or shall be capable of pronouncing the alteration (great though it be to the outward sense) to be non-essential, accidental, and, in comparison with the deep underlying identity existing in every human being, relatively unimportant, and at any rate as creating no bar to the possibility of mutual recognition of existences in the hereafter.

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It is in this sense that we are justified in concluding that what will survive in us and what will be recognised by us as in the truest sense that which we have lost, whether it be the child, the husband, or the wife, is that personal identity, that continuous and untransferable "ego" divested on the one hand of all that is unessential, or trivial or passing, and on the other hand clothed with all that either has been or is characteristic and makes man in the last resort himself and no other person. To revert to the Platonic terminology, it is the "Form" which alone is eternal.

If the foregoing reasoning still appears too abstract to meet the necessities of human feeling, it is possible that the same or a similar result may be attained more directly and more popularly.

There is in every created thing that has growth, whether in the vegetable or animal world, a moment at which the development has arrived at the highest and most perfect

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point to which the thing or animal is capable of attaining, and after which any change is a change of decadence. We say of a tree that it has come to its best, that it is past its prime, and the like ; and the language expresses a substantial truth. In the case of human beings the conditions are more complex, for with them there is not simply a question, as with a tree, of physical growth, but also of mental and moral development ; and these three parts of our nature seldom or never come to their best at the same moment, the highest condition of moral perfection, in particular, often not being arrived at till the physical energies are well-nigh exhausted.

And yet for all that, there *is* a best, a high-water mark which is reached, or, but for the accident of an earlier death, would be reached by every man, woman or child that has dwelt upon earth. That this prime, this zenith of a human being's life, does not correspond with his last hours,



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and is or may be reached at different times with different parts of himself, is a consideration which, having regard to the insignificant duration of all human existence in comparison with eternity, is, relatively speaking, unimportant. The conception at any rate is not a difficult one, that it is this supreme moment, whether actually reached or existing in potentiality only, associated with the highest moments actual or potential of the other parts of his being, which will be perpetuated and preserved in that future life as the true representation of the man, and will by the spiritual sense be recognised as the same with the man who was known and enshrined in our affection during the earthly life. It is permissible also to believe that in that perfect presentment, so met and recognised, there will be no room for doubt, no shadow of disappointment between the knower and the known, but that, once reunited, child with

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parent, wife with husband, friend with friend, each will find in the other of them all that he or she remembered, loved, had lost and desired to regain.

Armed with such a belief, a belief supported by reasoning falling short, no doubt, of demonstration, but at least in harmony with known analogies of nature, and in strict conformity with the working of the human mind and its necessary Forms of thought, we may find ourselves able to meet with equanimity, if not indeed to silence, the sullen questioning of the Agnostic :

“Who telleth a tale of unspeaking death ?  
Who lifteth the veil of what is to come ?  
Who painteth the shadows that are beneath  
The wide-winding caves of the peopled tomb ?  
Or uniteth the hopes of what shall be  
With the fears and the love of that which we  
see ?”

Rather may we hail as a truer expression of our belief the utterance of a poet endued

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with a spiritual insight no less profound  
than that of Shelley :

“To meet—worth living for—  
Worth dying for—to meet ;  
To meet—worth parting for,  
Bitter forgot in sweet ;  
To meet—worth parting before,  
Never to part more.”

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